



An Indian's Bus Journey

Across America

Text and photographs by SEBASTIAN JOHN

Across the plains

I had heard Americans talk about the “flat boring Midwest with nothing to see but corn, more corn and more corn.”

To me, however, the land wasn't flat at all. Soft hills, sliced with thick geological layers, rolled past my bus window, seemingly on a looped tape, altered by the occasional shrub, small tree or dirt track meandering out of sight. By evening, the big sky country turned into an IMAX theater experience of blue and orange.

Though the Greyhound buses

that my wife and I chose to travel aboard for our journey across America were generally homey and communal, they also have a deserved reputation for trouble. On the bus from St. Louis, Missouri, a group of young rowdies yelled obscenities and made fun of fellow passengers. One young man in particular was very nasty. However, justice was swift. At a gas station in the middle of nowhere in Kansas, he was kicked off the bus and left to fend for himself. Why? He drew all over the back of the seat in front of him

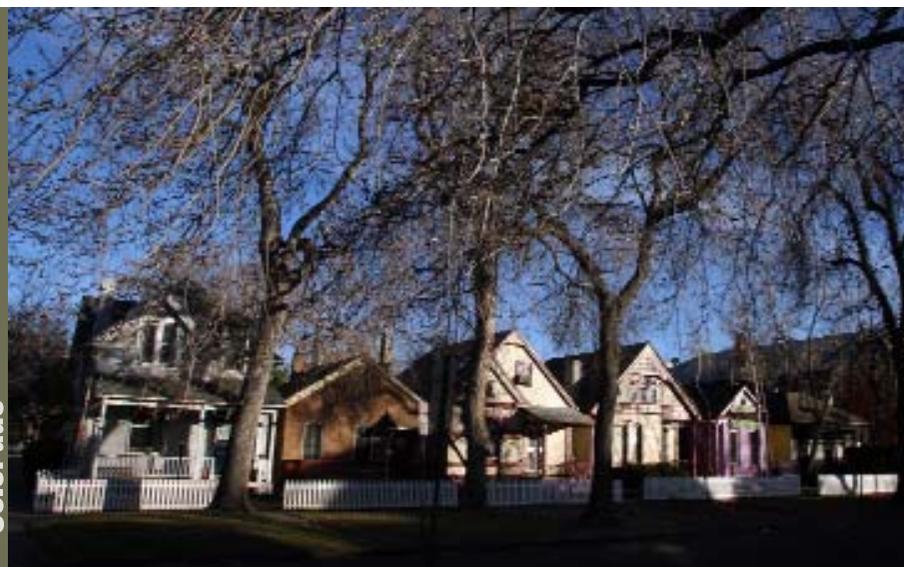
with a black pen, and someone sitting behind him reported it to the driver. As we drove away, the driver made an announcement, “If anyone else feels artistic, I won't just kick you off, I'll call the cops.” The bus was much more peaceful then, and soon people were swapping stories of other rowdies, other bus trips and how we'd all love a chance to stretch our legs.

The Rocky Mountains

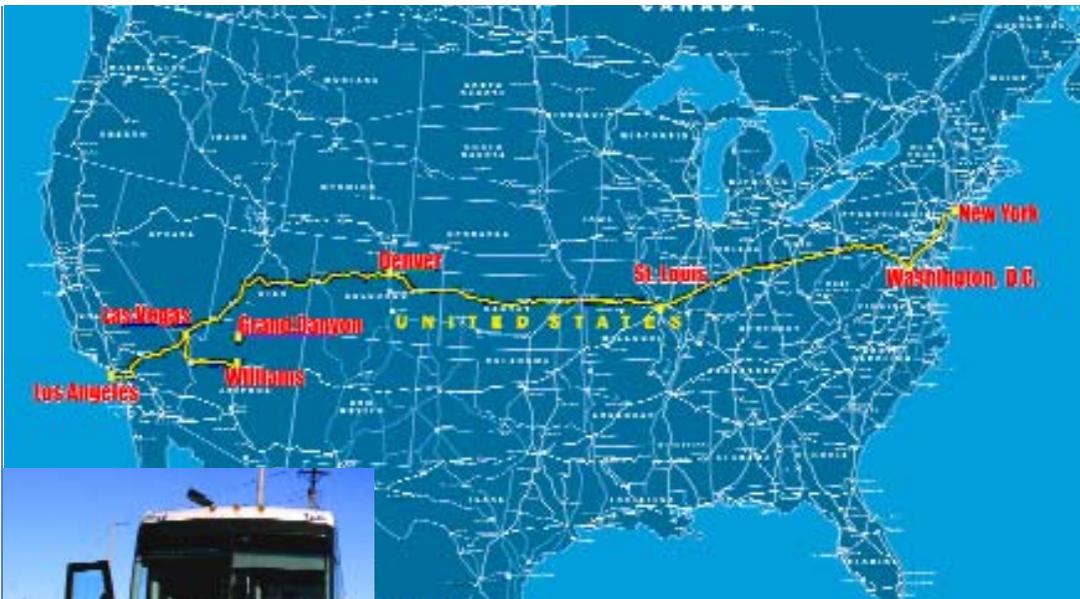
The air in Denver, Colorado is crisp and clean, and so is the city. Perhaps all the cold mountain wind sweeps the streets clean at night, or maybe it's just civic pride. Exactly at an elevation of one mile above sea level (hence the nickname Mile High City), Denver offers an excellent view of the Rocky Mountains. Despite the distinction of having America's biggest city park system, the largest amount of beer brewed and the largest airport, Denver still

*Above: The Grand Canyon, Arizona.
Left: Houses in Denver, Colorado.*

Editor's note: This is the second of a two-part series.







Left: The writer's journey on a Greyhound bus.

Below: Route 66 in Williams, Arizona.

Right: The Strip in Las Vegas, Nevada, where most of the major hotels and casinos are located.

Right below: Visitors enjoy a gondola ride inside the Venetian casino in Las Vegas. The "sky" is a lofty, painted ceiling.

bus I could hear the roar of the crowd as we passed the stadium.

The Grand Canyon

I was not prepared for the 446-kilometer long canyon carved out by the Colorado River, with depths of more than 2 kilometers, giving true meaning to the word "grand." Standing on the South Rim along with tourists from half a dozen nations, I realized that all of us did only two things. First the jaw dropped in amazement, and then came the clicking camera shutters.

We walked along the southern rim of the canyon, from

didn't impress me as much as the other cities we had visited. However, the pedestrian-only 16th Street Mall, with its eclectic mix of shops, restaurants and movie halls, was deservedly the attraction of the town.

But I will remember Denver for two things. The blink-and-you-miss-it Black American West Museum on California Street, and the vociferous Denver Broncos football team fans.

In India, cowboys are more or less restricted to John Wayne movies, and unfortunately I realized that is what most Americans see, too. Going through the halls of grimy leather jackets, cook pots and boots at the tiny cowboy museum gave me a perspective about how much African American culture has given to the country. It turns out that African Americans invented many rodeo techniques and were just as tough as Billy, the Kid. The fact that

so few know about African American cowboys shows how important it is to remember and honor them.

Apart from the Super Bowl championship on television, I have never seen a live American football game. So I was thrilled when I heard that the Denver Broncos were playing a home game. The demeanor of the city

seemed to change on the day of the match. Fans, dressed in Broncos colors of orange, navy blue and white, spilled into the streets, screaming, shouting, and filling up every bar stool in the city. Unfortunately, my wish to see a live game remains unfulfilled. Tickets were sold out months before. As we left the city, through the windows of the



Arizona



Mather Point to Hermit's Trailhead, a distance of nearly five kilometers. At every unexpected lookout point or turn the canyon exposed its many interesting faces, and with the sun setting, the canyon began displaying its kaleidoscopic colors. Truly, it is something to see before you die.

The two-street town of Williams, Arizona, where we stayed the night, is the nearest gateway to the Grand Canyon. The fabled Route 66 highway passes through and, like other small towns along this highway, it cultivates nostalgia.

Here, I had my first taste of true American food, slow cooked and done like it should be. The barbecued chicken, Caesar salad and mashed potatoes were well seasoned, non-greasy and fresh. I wanted to order another plate, but my wife stopped me. Faith in American food (after eating at one too many McDonald's) was revived.

Las Vegas

Leaving Williams and traveling on Highway 93, I noticed a strange yellowish orange glow in the sky. A few kilometers down the road, I saw a distinct white beam pierce the night. I realized the white light was the beam from the top of the Luxor casino, and the million wattage lights of Las Vegas were illuminating the night sky. And we were still 120 kilometers away from what many call Sin City.

The lights of the casinos on the 6.7-kilometer Las Vegas Strip were in all possible colors and contours the human mind could think of. I wondered how the city, built smack in the middle of the Nevada desert, was able to pay such astronomical electric bills.

The answer is that Las Vegas never sleeps. Tourists, from hourly wage workers to limo-riding glitterati, spend millions of dollars gambling on everything from penny slots to high



stakes poker. For every sinking heart, Vegas somehow manages to keep up the illusion of luck and glamor. When I was brooding over the \$5 that I lost in the penny slots, I heard a scream, and then saw a middle-aged woman run around the casino hugging the staff. She had just won a convertible BMW gambling at the slot machines. Instantly, the jingling of the machines across the casino became louder, including mine.

Los Angeles

A month after starting our trip from the Atlantic coast, it was fitting that we ended up in the city of the American dream

on the Pacific. We were staying with an old friend, who among other odd jobs is, of course, a struggling actor.

In Hollywood, one of the districts of the city of Los Angeles, the line between reality and altered reality is very thin. As our friend put it, everyone is obsessed with looking perfect. You never know, some agent might pick you out on the street and shepherd you into stardom.

I had my share of attention when I took out my camera to shoot the Hollywood sign, on a hilltop overlooking Hollywood Boulevard. Two ladies with perfect bodies, dress and makeup

slowed down, arched their necks and pirouetted to face my camera. Sadly, I was just a tourist; they would have to wait another day for their big break.

Our friend suggested we see the real movie business by getting free TV show tickets. Most sitcoms (situation comedies) and all talk shows need live audiences, and tickets are free: All you have to do is make a reservation. If you're lucky, you may even be paid to sit in an audience, though you may have to sit through three successive tapings in bitter cold. The reason? Producers think that cold audiences are livelier.

Unless you are really lucky,

the best way to be seen with a star is by heading toward Hollywood Boulevard. For a dollar I got my photo snapped posing with Spiderman! Performers dressed as famous stars patrol the Boulevard, which has the obligatory Walk of Fame, with stars of the famous and handprints of actors like Marilyn Monroe.

Our biggest splurge on the trip was the Universal Studios theme park, \$65 per head. But it was also one place where an adult could be a child without feeling stupid. The park has

Right: The Hollywood Walk of Fame in Los Angeles, California.



Travel Tips

Denver, Colorado

Move: Denver's light rail system is centered mostly in downtown and won't get you too far. Fortunately, buses are frequent and easy to figure out. Go to the station at the end of 16th Street for information and buses to all destinations. Fare \$1.15- \$2.50.

Free to see: 16th Street Pedestrian Mall, Larimer Square, Colorado State Capitol.

\$ but worth it: Black American West Museum, Denver Art Museum, Ski Train to skiing, Denver Broncos game (reserve in advance).

Eat: If you're staying in the budget-friendly Cherry Creek area of town, eat *saag paneer* at Bombay's Clay Oven just across the street from Cherry Creek Shopping Center. Taste the famous, spicy Denver Omelet at The Delectable Egg, near the Capitol off 16th Street.

Grand Canyon

Move: The Greyhound does go to Williams, Arizona, but it's far off the beaten

track and takes some twisted scheduling to get there. For the most convenience, rent a car from Las Vegas and drive to Williams, then onto the canyon. Otherwise, take the adorable glass-top tourist train that runs daily to the South Rim (tickets from \$58).

Free to see: Williams downtown.

\$ but worth it: Grand Canyon Park Pass, helicopter rides into the canyon.

Eat: Sorry, no Indian here. Stick to the diners. The Cruisers Café 66 has the best authentic American food I've ever tasted. Get the barbeque chicken.

Las Vegas, Nevada

Move: Wear comfortable shoes, as the sheer scale of each casino requires at least a kilometer walk. Stroll the South Strip, and when you want to see the cheaper, calmer climes of downtown, take the Deuce bus, which runs 24 hours a day up and down Las Vegas Boulevard. Fare is \$2.

Free to see: Treasure Island's Sirens, the Mirage's volcano, Circus Circus Midway, Bellagio fountains, downtown's Neon Museum, Fremont Street Experience.

\$ but worth it: Manhattan Express roller-coaster, Cirque du Soleil, Guggenheim Hermitage Museum at the Bellagio.

Eat: Make your way around the world, all in one meal. For Indian food (plus Chinese, Mexican, Japanese and Italian) head to the casinos' gigantic international buffets, the best of which is at the Rio. The best deal in town: the Paradise Buffet at the Fremont Casino. The all-you-can-eat breakfast is just \$5.29.

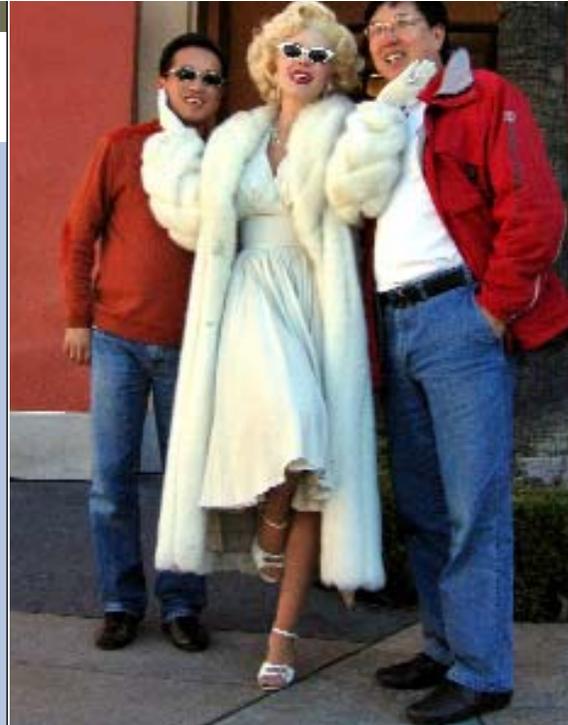
Los Angeles, California

Move: It's tough to see this city without a car, though the buses and train system serve a limited number of destinations (\$3 daily pass). If you want to spend more than two days here, rent a vehicle and get a good map.

Free to see: Venice Beach, Hollywood Boulevard, UCLA, Grauman's Chinese Theater sidewalk of famous handprints, Getty Center.

\$ but worth it: Universal Studios, Disneyland, Kodak Theater.

Eat: Too many choices to list. A favorite: Cowboy Sushi in Santa Monica near UCLA, where you get authentic Japanese food from waiters in cowboy hats and a loud, crazy crowd. Feeling homesick at the end of the trip? Drive south of Los Angeles to the city of Artesia and wear a salwaar in the Little India district. —S.J.



Tourists pose with a model dressed as Marilyn Monroe on Hollywood Boulevard in Los Angeles.

some of the best thematic amusement rides, and is home to the original sets of many of Hollywood's famous movies like *Jaws*, *Jurassic Park* and *Backdraft*.

But when the clamor and fake dinosaurs of the city got to me, I found peace high up in the hills at the world famous Getty Center. Its architecture is a bit odd, but the white marble walls certainly complemented an outstanding array of ancient and modern art. The exhibits rotate regularly, and the view from the avant-garde gardens is worth at least as much time as the art. Best of all, it's free.

In 30 days, after traveling more than 5,600 kilometers across 12 states, I felt I had made only a scratch in my attempt to know the country. I savored the pulsating life of the cities, and enjoyed the relative isolation and quietness of the great Midwest. I had been blown away by both natural and man-made wonders. As a foodie, I had enjoyed all the vast gastronomical delights the land had to offer. But above all, I learned that one need not spend lots of money to see America. A little bit of research and some friendly banter with the locals lands you in the cheapest and best places. For \$2,750, I thought our trip was a life achievement.

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